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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of literature about "community" in learning, or "cohorts" of learners, but there is relatively little empirical evidence about what these communities and cohorts might be. This paper reviews the literature, recognizes variations in meaning in discussions of community, and takes the first steps toward a model that describes and frames some of these issues in postsecondary education. The model presented is embedded in the concept of student "Connections," whether defined as "cohorts," "task groups," "Communities," "collaborative partnerships," or other entities. The model seeks to account for the many formal and informal ways that students connect as learners in and out of the classroom. The model is merely suggestive; there are not yet enough data to explain student learning connections fully. The suggestive model demonstrates the interrelationships and processes that launch connective learning situations. Communities of learners may begin purposely through an administrative structure or by student initiative. This model goes further by examining three elements related to connections among students in educational settings: (1) processes that initiate connections; (2) occurrences within connections; and (3) outcomes of connections. A figure illustrates the proposed model. (Contains 40 references.) (SLD)

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Student Connections: An Integrative Model of Cohorts, Community and Learning

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Student Connections: An Integrative Model of Cohorts, Community and Learning

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Introduction

Any inquiry into the making and meaning of "community" in learning or of "cohorts" of learners quickly leads to equivocal literature and unanswered questions. What do we mean by community? What evidence do we look for to affirm the existence of a community? Are cohorts by definition communities? Do communities and cohorts enhance all learning for all people? If not, which learning and for whom? And, finally, what are we to make of related concepts like "collaborations," "teams," and "learning partnerships?"

These questions are approached, but not always answered, in a growing body of literature that is heavy on case anecdotes and participant observation, but light on empirical evidence. While a number of investigations related to student cohorts and communities have noted enhanced group dynamics and individual development (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Basom, et al., 1996; Norris & Barnett, 1994; Reynolds & Hebert, 1995; Saltiel & Russo, 2000), other studies have suggested inconsistent learning gains and differential outcomes subject to numerous variables (Reynolds & Hebert, 1998a & b; Wesson, 1996; Yerkes, et al., 1995).

Clearly, cohort groups vary in their composition and experience. Individual experiences within the same cohort vary, and outcomes vary. Development of supportive and cohesive community occurs to different extents in different cohort groups; and the meaning of that community varies from one learner to the next. The same can also be said for learning communities. This research is aimed at recognizing these variations and taking initial steps to

suggest a tentative model that describes and frames some of the many findings that address these issues in post secondary educational settings.

This inquiry began by examining the terminology used by the higher education community as ways to structure programs designed to connect learners to one another. Implied (we believe) is an assumption that when learners are connected to one another, not only is the learning enhanced, but also retention is increased. The belief was fueled in part by the work of Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) on how college affects students. In particular, "environmental factors that maximize persistence and educational attainment include a peer culture in which students develop close on-campus friendships, participate frequently in college-sponsored activities, and perceive their college to be highly concerned about the individual student, as well as a college emphasis on supportive services...," (p. 604). Therefore, the more we know about these program structures, the better we will be able to use them for different programmatic purposes

These initial thoughts sparked the idea of developing this model. Difficulties ensued rather quickly because of the imprecise nature of the terminology utilized in tandem with descriptive jargon intended to mean a specific type of structural format; yet delivering something different.

The model we present is embedded in the concept of student "connections," whether they accurately can be defined as "cohorts," "task groups," "communities," "collaborative partnerships" or other arrangements. Thus, the model seeks to account for the many formal and informal ways that students connect as learners in and out of the classroom. All of these structural frameworks seek to "connect" learners to one another so that they will interact with one another, thus creating a type of community of learners. In this way, we are able to pull under

one umbrella the range of definitions offered by researchers when studying various groups of students who interact together during their learning experiences.

In addition to examining reports of what happens during learning connections and what outcomes have resulted, our model seeks to locate the point of departure for those connections. A useful framework for examining what occurs among students and groups in various connective learning situations seems to be one that asks about the process of making connections happen. By considering processes that launch connective learning situations – some undertaken deliberately by administrative design and some developed more spontaneously by student initiative – we are able to develop a model that includes three vital elements related to connections among students in educational settings: processes that initiate connections, occurrences within connections; and outcomes of connections.

The model we seek to depict in this overview is suggestive, rather than definitive, because there simply is not yet enough data about student learning connections to merit certainty in terms of their full meaning for student experiences and outcomes. However, a suggestive model at this early stage may assist researchers and practitioners to intentionally construct inquiry and activity that can fill gaps in our understanding of connectivity in learning.

The Definitional Smog

A community of learning is not the same as a learning community. A cohort program is different than a learning community. Yet both structures are used to build a feeling of "community" among learners. The way in which we define these terms dictates how they are used. Therefore, it is important to discuss how these phrases are defined.

Community. When one thinks of the word "community" we assume that members of a specific community have something in common. There is something that ties members to one another. In higher education, the tradition of community is central to the educational experience (Boyer, 1987). The tradition of community refers to ensuring individual students recognize they are a part of a larger community and develop a greater awareness of the world around them.

Students who are actively involved with learning and the process of learning have enhanced their learning ((Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, p. 5). This involvement with learning "leads to a sense of community that facilitates learning and retention," (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, p. 6). This sense of community is more than a sense of belonging. It is the feeling of coming home, belonging to an extended family - - - but of an academic nature. Connected not by blood, but by the common bonds of the pursuit of knowledge and learning. Each academy is different just like every family is. This is what a community of learners is all about.

Cohort Programming. Reynolds & Hebert (1998a) use the term "cohort" to mean "a learning arrangements with required sequences of courses and with student groups that stay intact throughout all or most of their work toward an academic degree or program completion." (p. 34). Yerkes, et al, (1995) define a cohort as "a group of students who engage in a program of studies together," (1995) which nicely aligns with Barnett & Caffarella (1992) definition" groups of students who go through a one-to two-year study program together." Saltiel & Russo (2001) define a cohort as a "group of individuals who enter a program at the same time, proceed through all classes and academic program requirements together and complete the program as a group."

While all define "cohort programming" similarly, the subtleties of differences in the definitions highlight the discrepancies in how the programs are structured on an operational

level. For example, Reynolds & Hebert (1998a), Yerkes (1995), and Barnett & Caffarella (1992 do not indicate whether the students begin the academic program together or are only in the cohort for a particular series of courses, such as those in the major. Through conversations with colleagues, we find the definition used by Saltiel & Russo (2001) as fairly representative of most programming. The slogan "join a cohort" is something we are seeing more of as universities and colleges are marketing their academic programs. A cohort program is one in which group of individuals enter a program at the same time, proceed through all classes and academic requirements together, completing together, thus creating an atmosphere for learning in which a synergy is present and the learners effectiveness is increased.

Learning Communities. In academe, the term, "learning community" is used when there is "a deliberate restructuring of the curriculum to build a community of learners among students and faculty, " (Smith & Hunter, 1988, p. 33). Curriculum is structured so that students and faculty are grouped or clustered together for courses around an interdisciplinary theme over a longer duration of time than in traditional courses. However, Gabelnick and others (1990) define learning communities as "one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise." A hallmark distinction to learning communities is that they are administratively driven and while students may elect to be part of a learning community, rarely do they stay together for the duration of their program as in a cohort program.

Collaborative Learning. Another term being used today is that of collaborative learning. Eloquently defined by Wildavsky in 1986 as when "participants make use of each others' talents

to do what they either could not have done at all or as well alone." Collaborative learning entails "sharing the creation of something new," (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999, p.31); not merely working together in a joint project. Collaborative learning by its very definition means to collaborate with a purposeful goal in mind. Collaborative learning – when it is truly "collaborative" and not merely "cooperative" establishes powerful connections that enhance student success (Brufee, 1993; Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

The State of the Inquiry

If definitions of actions and concepts related to learning connections are sometimes equivocal, inquiry about what happens in and what results from these connections also can be expected to lead to ambiguous conclusions. When separate studies define "learning community" or "student cohort" differently, what sense can we expect to make of the results?

Nevertheless, it can be useful to overview some of the research and discussion that has been undertaken on various aspects of learner connections--if not to uncover definitive areas of agreement, at least to gain a sense of what exists and what might be missing. In this regard, many types of learner connections (cohorts, learning communities, collaborations, partnerships, etc.) can come under one umbrella, since the endeavor is to scan the horizon, rather than to make comparisons or find truths. For purposes of this study, learner connections are discussed in three areas that represent elements typically addressed in related literature: 1) Formative processes; 2) characteristics of effective efforts; and 3) outcomes of learning connections.

Formative processes. Many, if not most, cohort degree and certificate programs in higher education are initiated by administrators and faculty who recruit and admit applicants in ways

similar to those used in non-cohort programs. There are, however, some interesting variations on this theme. In an early description cohorts in educational administration programs, Barnett and Caffarella (1992) noted some differences such as: admission based on geographical cohort subgroups at Brigham Young University and intensive screening to assure group diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, learning styles and experience at Butler University. In other words, cohorts intentionally developed by administrative design may include group selection based on some estimate of likely effectiveness. Yerkes, et al. (1995) distinguished these institutionally designed cohorts as "closed" (lock step sequence of required courses) or "open" (including some sequenced/required courses for the group and some individual electives). Another type, however, she labeled "fluid." The fluid arrangement emphasized student initiative in group selection and community formation, with learners free to join the cohort at more than one entry point.

While some cohorts are institutionally designed, institutional forces may only lightly nudge others. For example, group of doctoral students at University of South Florida organized themselves into a "research cohort" after a professor suggested an area of research in which all could find common threads while independently pursuing different research questions. The group of six students, all of whom graduated in a timely manner, met biweekly, then once a week, to share stories of progress, findings and analyses (Witte & James, 1998, pp. 54-56).

Learning communities, when defined as including linked courses or integrated curricular features, clearly must be initiated by faculty and administrators. These strictly defined communities not only have integrated subject matter, but also "a boundary that defines who is and is not a member" (Brower & Dettinger, 1998, p. 16). Smith (1993) suggested that the more attention given to thematic integration and to team teaching within themes, "the higher the pay-

off in terms of student engagement and learning" (p. 34). To alleviate issues of unequal power, however, Tosey and Gregory (1998) call for a "peer learning community" where the students form the community with the assistance of faculty who act only as "facilitators" who allow the community to grow in self-sufficiency and "relinquish dependency on those with hierarchical status" (p. 77).

A number of researchers put less emphasis on curricular linkage and include as "communities" any student groups that, often on their own initiative, become cohesive and supportive around educational goals related to learning, course completion and degree attainment. For example, Haworth and Conrad (1997), who studied masters degree programs at 20 institutions, referred to a "sense of student community" that they found to be "based largely on the supportive camaraderie students generated among themselves as they taught and learned from one another both in and out of class" (p. 73). Their research also indicated that while some communities were established by students, others happened when "faculty, administrative and student leaders deliberately went about building learning environments that nurtured a sense of community..." (p. 69).

In its broadest definition, a community of learners also might form when faculty and administrators simply assign the kinds of tasks that require or inspire group effort and mutual support, such as group assignments for community service, professional field experiences or complex research. Inevitably, the proximity and intensity involved in such experiences contributes to community building among those who share them. (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994; Morgan et al., 1993, Ryan, et al., 1997). Similarly, academic programs that attract limited numbers of students who are enthusiastic in their pursuit of similar learning goals, such as women's or ethnic studies programs, can readily provide an environment for student

initiated community. From that starting point of interests and values, students themselves may form cohesive groupings by registering to take classes together, commuting together, studying together and/or socializing together.

While formative processes for cohorts and communities of learners often occur at the instigation of program planners rather than learners, smaller groupings of learners form with greater reliance on personal initiative. For example, collaborative partnerships of two, possibly three, students rely greatly on interpersonal chemistry and "must select each other," according to Sgroi and Saltiel (1998, p. 87). In fact, some are unintentional, as partners discover "mutual striving toward common goals" and "complementary personality traits and qualities" (pp. 87-88).

The initiating arrangements for learner connections clearly range from administrative strategy to participant serendipity. As the concept of learner connections come under greater scrutiny from researchers and others, it may be important to consider the implications of formative processes on for issues of student-faculty interaction and issues of power and equality. Two categories of connections described by Hafernik, Messerschmitt, and Vandrick (1997) are hierarchical and equal, but "truly equal relationships seem less common than hierarchical ones" (p. 32). Undoubtedly, the ways in which connections are initiated have at least some relationship to the degree of equality achieved as they unfold.

Characteristics of effective learner connections. Some arrangements aimed at student connections have very specific curricular and/or administrative characteristics, such as the topical integration of linked courses or the lock-step sequencing of degree cohorts. However, this discussion is aimed at noting some key findings concerning the internal elements of

connected groups—the goals, tasks, behaviors, and cultures that are shared by participants in groups experiencing some degree of successful learning connection.

Brower and Dettinger (1998) offered a model for framing the characteristics of effective learning communities that emphasized three essential program components: Physical (meeting or living location), social (interpersonal relations), and academic (curricular content). An effective community that succeeds in enhancing learning "must integrate these three components to some degree" (p. 17). A second dimension of successful communities for these researchers was the promotion (intentionally or unintentionally) of three areas of responsibility: Professional, ethical, and civic. When the three areas of responsibility are combined with the three essential program components, the result is a "learning environment that promotes the development of transformative learning in a community setting" (p. 18). Brower and Dettinger found several instances of achievement in terms of this model, including the residential colleges at University of Michigan and Michigan State University and the Bradley Learning Community, a freshman residential and learning experience at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Among the characteristics found in efforts incorporating various elements of the model were: a sense of group identity among participants, support for engaging new members of the community, connections among disciplines, facilities for learning community activities, and integration of academic and social life.

Peer and student-faculty relationships have been perhaps the most widely explored characteristic of student connections, perhaps because of a long line of research that suggests a link between these interactions and student learning (Centra & Rock, 1971; McKeachie, 1990; Nunn, 1996; Pascarella, 1985). Reynolds and Hebert (1995) undertook survey research among students in matched pairs of cohort and non-cohort degree programs to examine possible

differences in *group interaction*, "the activities and behaviors among individuals in a group as they undertake various tasks and functions—intellective and communicative," and *group cohesiveness*, "the total field of forces that influence membership retention" (p. 35). They found that both interaction and cohesiveness occurred to greater extents in the two cohort groups than in the non-cohort groups. In an interview segment of the Reynolds and Hebert research, faculty who taught in both arrangements reported observing greater levels of task and social cohesiveness among cohort students who arranged themselves into study groups and socialized after class. They also observed among cohort students "a spirit of willingness to take part and participate... more student follow-up on points made by other students and more attempts to be certain they understood one anothers' views" (p. 38).

These and other similar results confirmed earlier findings concerning the characteristics of well formed groups, including increased cohesiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Ridgeway, 1987) and increased quality and quantity of interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Shaw, 1981). Norris and Barnett (1994) found that while cohort structures do not guarantee effective cohort groups, those that are effective are characterized by the "three major cornerstones" of "*interaction* (which results in cohesiveness among group members), *purpose* (which promotes collaboration) and *interdependence* (which represents the hallmark of a group's realness)" (p. 33).

Among other characteristics of learners connected in various arrangements are relationships with faculty, advisers and/or facilitators that create shared commitment and trust (Witte & James, 1998). Norris and Barnett (1994) suggested that successful facilitation strategies for learner groups include planned reflection and group processing, as well as observer feedback. They noted that another characteristic of successful learning groups, active

participation, was encouraged by facilitating role plays, simulations, problem solving practice and student support groups. Other researchers have noted community formation when active participation includes group experiential learning through internships, practicum assignments or service learning (Hondagneu-Sotello & Raskoff, 1994; Shapiro, 1998). Reflective seminars, integrating theory and practice through sharing insights about field activities, also are a feature of many cohort groups (Barnett & Cafferella, 1992).

A number of the experiences that characterize learning communities or cohorts can be located in the concept of shared goals or tasks. Clearly, shared purpose is a key element of successful groups (Norris and Barnett, 1994; Yerkes, et al., 1995). Zander (1985) noted purpose as "a promise among people that they will try to reach a given state of affairs through collaborative effort" (p. 34). Thus, group purpose may include specific learning task completion goals, service or experiential goals, or an overall goal of degree completion as a group. Clear and shared purpose supports group interdependence and individual achievement and helps to "propel members toward clarifying and attaining their goals" (Yerkes, et al., 1995). Zaccaro and Lowe (1988) found that group cohesiveness fostered increased task commitment.

Clearly, every arrangement that connects learners does not necessarily become an effective learning connection. A number of analysts have noted potential problems for learner groups. Among these are competitive relationships, often put in motion by faculty, that sabotage student community (Haworth & Conrad, 1997) and distracting social relationships that might overshadow goal attainment (Davis, 1969). Additionally, a group with several assertive and experienced student members, combined with deferral to those students on the part of others, may never achieve truly shared interaction or interdependence (Reynolds & Hebert, 1995). However, understanding the characteristics present in successful groups can help students and

educators undertake and facilitate positive learner connections. In summary, it appears that many of the characteristics of successful connections work in dynamic synergy. Factors such as interaction, cohesion, purpose, active participation, interdependence and facilitation work together to create a fertile environment for enhancing group and individual development.

Outcomes of successful connections. While the characteristics within a group of students are crucial in shaping actions and accomplishments, they do not constitute outcomes. Generally, as with any student settings, the desired outcomes in communities, cohorts or other identified student groups are related to knowledge acquisition and skill building, personal and interpersonal development and enhanced professional performance. Degree attainment in and of itself is an important outcome for many students and is closely related to self esteem and career advancement. Outcomes of particular interest to program administrators and faculty include factors such as increased student retention and participant/alumni satisfaction.

Personal and interpersonal development, while difficult to distinguish as an outcome versus a group process characteristic, often has been cited in studies of communities and cohorts. In a survey of cohort programs for administrator preparation at 23 institutions, Yerkes, et al., (1995) found that "individual and group development of cohorts appeared to be a focus in most programs and was achieved through a plethora of activities designed to encourage self-initiation, self-evaluation and self-confidence" (p. 14). According to a number of outcome discussions, programs are accomplishing this focus. Haworth and Conrad (1998) found that in masters degree programs that could be viewed as creating communities of learners, students acquired better communication and teamwork skills, as well as a respect for collaborative approaches to inquiry and problem solving. They concluded that "membership in such a community [of

collegial teaching and learning] greatly enriched students' learning experiences and positively affected their growth and development" (p. 69). Norris and Barnett (1994), in their study of cohort groups at four universities, found significant gains in areas of personal development that carried over from experiencing group interdependence. Participants in their study noted development in areas such as acceptance of and care for others, as well as increased capacity and desire to "support, promote and inspire others in their development" (p. 31). Personal values clarification was reported by participants as "strengthened convictions," "enhanced confidence" and "confirmed beliefs" (p. 32). Similarly, Witte and James (1998) noted that participants in their study came to recognize "teamwork as a venue for success both within and outside the academic world" (p. 60).

Reynolds and Hebert (1998a) used matched pairs of cohort and non-cohort classes in masters degree programs at five institutions to investigate differences in affective, cognitive, and professional transfer learning outcomes. A total of 395 respondents (177 in cohort degree programs; 165 in non-cohort same degree programs) answered survey questions aimed at uncovering learning gains in each of the three outcome domains. Findings indicated that while all learning gains for all students were substantial, the differences between the cohort and non-cohort student gains were "limited, largely confined to affective learning among specific groups of students" (p. 37). Significant ($p<0.01$) affective learning gains of cohort students over non-cohort students occurred among male students, the youngest adults (age 24 to 29) and students in the first half of their degree programs. The study uncovered no significant learning gain differences between cohort and non-cohort students in the domains of cognitive learning (knowledge acquisition, skill development and critical thinking) or professional transfer (use of knowledge, skills and interpersonal development outside the classroom).

The Reynolds and Hebert (1998b) study found extensive learning in all three domains among cohort (and non-cohort) students and confirmed descriptive inquiries such as Norris and Barnett (1994) that demonstrated affective learning gains among cohort groups. However, the limited differences found between cohort and non-cohort learning gains may serve as a reminder that course formatting comprises only one area of influence of student learning. Pre-entry characteristics, personal goals and quality of effort also are important contributors to learning outcomes (Tinto, 1997).

Studies that examined knowledge acquisition among cohort students without comparisons to non-cohort students have noted subtle responses that may not become evident in survey data. For example, when Norris and Barnett (1994) analyzed the journals of 51 cohort students, they found enhanced knowledge and understanding described in terms like "learning with meaning," "application of theory to reality" and "relevance" (p.31).

Similarly encouraging findings have been cited for learning communities with linked courses and thematic curricular offerings. Smith (1993) noted that although clear comparisons of learning outcomes among different learning community models were not available, "preliminary evidence suggests that the more thematically integrated and team-taught models do have higher pay-off in terms of student engagement and learning..." (p. 34). Morgan, et al (1993) reported on a freshman year learning community at the University of New England that addressed scientific literacy and interdisciplinary, while emphasizing learning that could readily be transferred across the curriculum and throughout the college years. Linked courses, reflective seminars, content and process practice and group laboratory projects were included. Students found that when they learned and practiced scientific method they acquired capacities in hypothesis formulation, observation and data analysis that were readily transferable to other topics in their linked

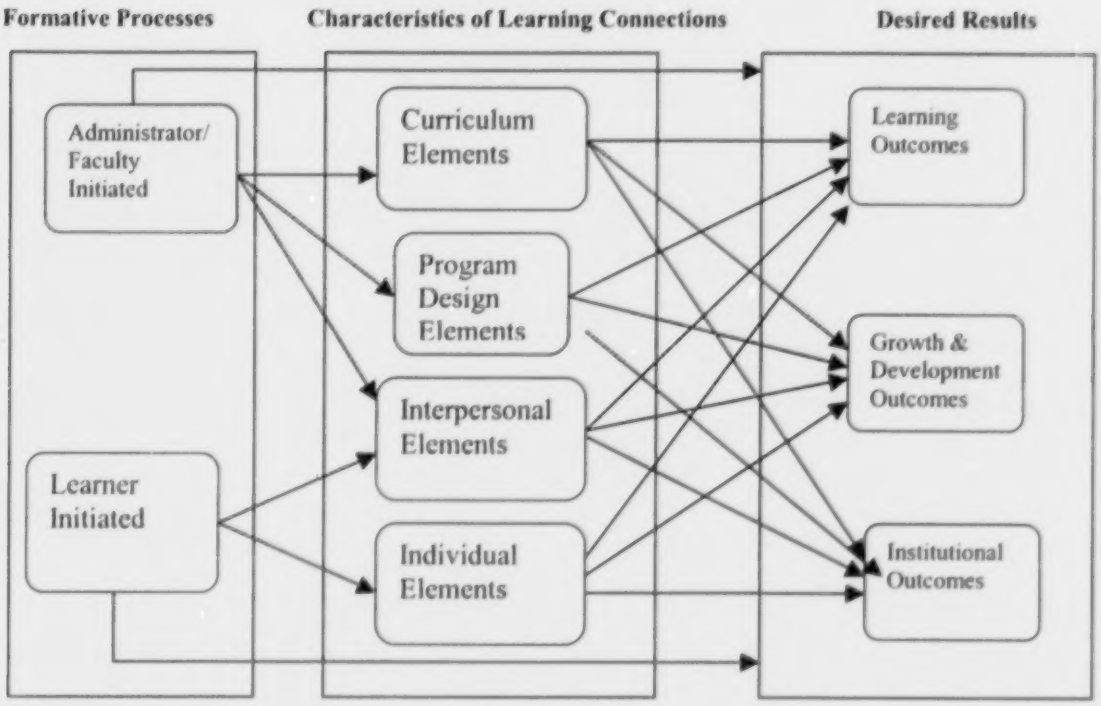
seminars and to future areas of study. When the students learned process analysis about a biological phenomenon, they learned about biology and acquired skills in a mode of composition. Thus, the important learning in among some students in successful groups may be in the realm of learning processes that support continued learning.

Clearly, a convincing body of research has examined successful student connections and identified in them patterns of interaction and cohesiveness and elements of mutual support and interdependence that lead to personal development and persistence to completion. However, our understanding of cognitive learning outcomes that may result among interconnected learners is less definitive. Even with limited understandings of exactly how various arrangements to connect learners work and what will be their outcomes, we may know enough to suggest a model that organizes what we know in ways that might guide further ideas and investigations.

A Possible Model

The model presented below demonstrates the interrelationships and processes that launch connective learning situations. Communities of learners may begin purposely by an administrative structure or by student initiative (Reynolds & Saltiel, 2000). This model goes further by examining three vital elements related to connections among students in educational settings: processes that initiate connections, occurrences within connections; and outcomes of connections.

A Conceptual Model of Learner Connections



The table below depicts in greater detail the elements contained in the conceptual model and includes examples of them in practice.

EXAMPLES FROM PRACTICE: CHARACTERISTICS AND OUTCOMES OF LEARNER CONNECTIONS

Characteristics of Learning Connections		**Desired Results**	
Curriculum Elements	▪ Course linking ▪ Course sequencing ▪ Thematic Integration ▪ Learning/Student Assignments ▪ Experiential learning activities	Learning Outcomes	▪ Cognitive Gains ▪ Affective Learning ▪ **Learning Transfer**
Interpersonal Elements	▪ Shared goals, tasks and culture ▪ Social Interaction ▪ Peer Interaction ▪ Faculty/Student Interaction ▪ Group Cohesiveness ▪ Shared Purpose ▪ Shared Trust ▪ Interdependence	Growth & development Outcomes	▪ Degree/credential attainment ▪ Career enhancement ▪ Self esteem gain
Individual Elements	▪ Learner Ability ▪ Learner Experience ▪ Individual Goals ▪ Individual Commitment	Institutional Outcomes	▪ Increased student retention ▪ Alumni participation ▪ Institutional efficiencies
Program Design Elements	▪ Physical Setting ▪ Faculty/administrative participation ▪ Course delivery modes (Distance, live, Intensive, traditional).		

Beyond the Model

Clearly, the model presented here is a conceptual starting point. It is aimed at suggesting to practitioners and researchers a group of factors that might be considered in successful student connections, from initiation to outcome. It seeks to clarify three key areas of concern in the notion of student connections, as well as several factors and options within those areas. While the model demonstrates the directions of possible influence, it does not indicate strength of influence, significance of any correlation, or causal relations. Nor does it explore the possibility

of reciprocal correlation among characteristic elements.

As this is a new model, we continue to seek evidence that affirms the existence of student connectedness by examining the impact of formative processes on characteristics within student communities and outcomes of those communities. A variety of approaches are needed to begin to understand processes and influences of communities of learners. A model can help organize various approaches into a body of work that sheds light on the complex dynamics of process and outcomes related to human interaction in learning situations. This model provides a conceptual framework for future research to explore the dynamics that impact and influence learners in group settings.

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